

CONSOLIDATION OF IDRC-CANADA NETWORKS AND REGIONAL PROGRAMS ON SOCIAL POLICY: COORDINATION PROCEDURES AND RESEARCH STRATEGIES

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This document discusses the procedures for the coordination of networks and regional projects which the Program on Assessment of Social Policy Reforms (hereafter referred to as the Program) of the International Development Research Centre has been supporting in Latin America².

The objective of the work was to collect opinions and make proposals for the future, keeping in mind particularly the medium term set by IDRC for the Program (the period 1997-2000), as well as the long term beyond this date. Special attention was given to the proposal for and implementation of extensive evaluative research in the social policies of the region, including the participation of other international agencies (such as development banks and public welfare foundations) and of governments of the region whose role commonly is focused on the evaluation of social policy programs and projects³.

This Report is divided into three sections. The first section explores the various environments of the Program: the changing situation of society and the State in Latin America with reference to social inequality,

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This document is the outcome of a consultation process contracted by IDRC from May to December 1997. The objective of the contract was to provide input to IDRC's Assessment of Social Policy Reforms Program Initiative (hereafter referred to as "the Program") internal assessment of its activities, as well as a discussion of work perspectives with the managers of the networks and regional projects involved in this Program. The consultant was given access to IDRC documents and to the various products of such networks and projects (See Annex 1). In addition, personal interviews were conducted with IDRC officials in Montevideo and Ottawa, with the leaders of the networks and regional projects in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Santiago and Rio de Janeiro, and with other social scientists in the region specializing in the topic of this consultation. He also participated in working meetings called by these networks. This report is based on the combination of all this information.

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The activities of the consultant focused on the gathering of information on the performance of the networks and regional projects, as well as the opinions of the various actors mentioned on the forms of cooperation adopted by IDRC for the research, dissemination of know-how and use of results in the field of social policies in Latin America. The consultation had as [text lost]....

its political impacts and prevailing ideas on the role of the State, as well as recent changes in the production of knowledge on these topics in the region. This exploration facilitates the extension of the *environment* of the IDRC Program strategy, which builds on the links established in the region over the previous two decades to establish effective cooperative mechanisms in the area of social policy. The second section contains recommendations which imply partial modifications of this strategy for the future, taking into account various experiences of recent years and changes which have occurred in the region. This section also discusses the identification and involvement of possible IDRC "*partners*" for this Program, and the difficulties presented by the gap between economics based models and approaches and those that draw on the social sciences. Finally, the report ends with a short section of conclusions.

I. Environment

1. The current economic and political environment for social policies in Latin America

In the Nineties, there were substantial changes in the formation and implementation of social policies in Latin America, as compared with the previous two decades. These modifications were of fundamental importance both to the activities of the networks and regional projects⁴ that we are dealing with, as well as to the individual social scientists. They can be summarized, in abbreviated form, in the following points:

a. *The level of social inequality has become intolerable.*

Latin America in general, and some of the larger countries in the region in particular, have distinguished themselves internationally by their high level of social and economic inequality, based on quantitative measurements of such phenomena. Thus, the phenomenon of social inequality became politically intolerable and a priority on the international development agenda for inter-governmental organizations and funding agencies during the Nineties. This was due, in part, to the growth in inequality indicators and their marked contrast to less unequal societies in other regions which, have, from the Seventies, been experiencing much higher growth rates (as in South East Asian countries), and in part to an increased awareness of this phenomenon. While, during previous decades, concerns focused on the unequal distribution of development benefits, political attention and urgency in the Nineties have concentrated on inequality as an obstacle to growth. Specifically, the new consensus centres on the need for investment in human development (in particular on education and health) as one of the mechanisms for facilitating these countries' ability to join the global economy. A workforce with unacceptable levels of basic education, nutrition and health standards is seen as one lacking the proper qualifications for joining the modern economy. **Thus, political debate on the extreme and unacceptable inequality became legitimate and a fundamental element of the social and economic diagnosis developed by governments, investment banks and international agencies.**

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Networks are projects which support a program of research, information and dissemination activities carried out by a group of centres in various countries of the region. The networks have a coordination facility, a consultative council and, in many cases, national nuclei or nodes. The networks are funded by IDRC on the basis of projects which include phases. The regional projects are research projects with a topic, carried out by a group of centres. These projects are terminated at the end of the studies and, as opposed to the networks, are not expected to continue with subsequent phases.

b. *The debate on inequality is linked to the globalization issue.*

This is, in fact, the basic focus of the contemporary debate: the globalization of the economy (i.e. the rapid expansion of international markets and multinational corporations) and of technology (particularly communications and information processing) have resulted, at least during the previous two decades, in greater inequality within and between nations, which is most probably at variance with what happened during the market expansion of a century ago. However, it is clear that globalization does not reduce the role of the State, for example in the regulation of public services or the promotion of education and the development of national scientific and technological development. The same can be said with regard to **the growing social inequality and its consequences for national integration and cohesion, which has become a focus of state concern in central countries as well as in those on the periphery. Poverty and, above all, unemployment are not, in any case, problems whose solution can be left to the "normal" operations of market forces. Here as well, state intervention is politically legitimate, although it must operate with new mechanisms.**

c. *The Welfare State in a state of terminal crisis.*

In the overall, frequently highly ideological debate on the role of the State in the economy, there is a new consensus that, the social policies developed by local versions of the Welfare State in Latin America since the Forties, have been ineffective in promoting the well-being of extensive sectors of the population. They have frequently increased rather than lessened the degree of social inequality and proved to be highly inefficient in the use of available resources. This negative view of the Welfare State as it has developed in the region is, however, being accompanied by deep disagreements on the organizational structures and forms which should replace it. On the one hand, drawing on European experiences since the Seventies of state withdrawal from and restructuring of public services, funding agencies and inter-governmental organizations have set out general principles, such as decentralization, privatization and cost recovery formulas as means to increase equality, effectiveness and efficiency in social policies. On the other hand, its critics have seen these principles as one more justification to reduce the functions of the State and give pre-eminence to fiscal balance, accompanied by the withdrawal of socially protected networks thus favouring those with survival potential as well as social affiliations and identities and, hence, increasing even further the marginalization of extensive sections of the population. **Despite these diverging positions, however, the debate reflects an agreement on the central importance of social policies for the future development of societies in the region. This is at variance to pressures for drastically reducing fiscal deficits by restricting expenditures.**

d. *Social policies are subject to a democratic political game*

In the Nineties, for the first time in the contemporary history of Latin America, all the countries of the region are governed by civil regimes based on fully legitimate electoral procedures and constitutional foundations. Although these democracies suffer from many limitations, they are exceptional because they involve political decision procedures - above all in the area of social policies - open to public scrutiny and multiple pressures. This is in sharp contrast to the vertical, centralized and much more opaque arrangements which characterized the State in the recent past, under the military or civilian regimes, with much more limited political participation. One of the outstanding features of the democratization has been the de facto political decentralization, i.e. the increasing relative weight of provincial and regional politics in the respective national environments. Another related feature is the increasing weight of the legislative power, at least in formal decision-making procedures, in spite of the attempts by the executive power to impose emergency legislation in the field of economic policy. Social policies (such as social security, funding of health care or basic education) are becoming fundamental topics in the political debate, which now includes diverse and large social groups with very different abilities to articulate their proposals. **Therefore, the search for and the formulation of social policy alternatives are of interest to governments, their opposition and very**

diverse sectors of the civil society. These policy alternatives are very unequally developed and articulated politically. The interest, moreover, is not necessarily expressed in the form of effective demands.

e. *The management of social policies is becoming specialized and professional.*

Although education, health, work and social security were established as special functions in the government structures of the original national states in Latin America - based, at least, on adequate technical equipment in spite of their lack of specialized education - these structures have been restructured and incorporate extensive new professional segments, often as a product of the growth of social sciences in the region. This restructuring has occurred in the context of a huge bureaucracy which is being seen to consist of ineffective, inefficient service structures, which are often corrupt and always subject to a high degree of functional corporatism. The often conflicting intentions, of replacing them with more decentralized and flexible structures, or supplementing them by creating ad hoc agencies for the implementation of focalized policies, is generally accompanied by the major presence at various organizational levels of new professionals trained in the social sciences. In other cases, the new organizations operate in parallel with the old, as a part of the State or outside of it (for example, as companies or including non-profit non-governmental organizations), with close links to the development banks and other international agencies. In addition, the private profit or non-profit sector is becoming stronger, specializing in the performance of professional services in such fields as health, education and social security and joining the public sector through contracts. The decentralization of services and the diversification of service organizations are creating greater problems of coordination and quality control than in the past. **Therefore, there are new actors and communication channels requiring information on and analysis of the progress of the reform processes.**

2. Producing knowledge on social policies.

Since the Eighties, partly as a result of the democratization process, profound changes have been occurring in the intellectual field, particularly with regard to the higher education and scientific research systems. Within this field, research, analysis and debate on social policies are becoming increasingly linked and acquiring new forms of expression. The networks and regional projects of the Program, established during this period, provide examples of these changes, which are described below in an overview manner.

a. *The social sciences are becoming more institutionalized and professionalized.*

Without question, these processes do not merely repeat those with which the social sciences in the central countries are experimenting. However, with the expansion and regulation of the higher education systems in the major countries of the region, education and research in economy, sociology, political science and other disciplines rest on institutional foundations which are firmer than those in the past. In these disciplines, the new professions which were already taking shape in the Fifties but encountered problems of scale as well as hostile political environments, are being consolidated within the educational and scientific systems. In addition to the universities and teaching institutions, the independent academic centres which appeared in the previous decades, are growing in numbers and changing their intellectual focus. They are now much less academic than in the past, and their tasks bring them closer to local governments, non-governmental organizations and social activism. Although the diversity of national environments prevents any generalizations, it can be confirmed that, in all areas, there is a growing number of professionals and institutions which, at least partially, dedicate themselves to research and higher education, although their economic support bases and academic standards are being eroded. Only in certain countries, such as Brazil and Mexico, are professional qualifications being confirmed by specialized training in post-graduate careers and by formal recognition systems, such as accreditation of titles and programs. In summary, **the scope is growing and the diversity increasing within the field of social sciences, but there are no independent mechanisms to ensure academic recognition and control of the production of knowledge, which often**

occurs in applied activities conducted by governmental or non-governmental organizations.

- b. *The academic sector in general, and the universities in particular, are suffering a deterioration in prestige and public funding which is having an impact on their intellectual independence.*

This dual deterioration, shared by higher education systems worldwide, is limiting the ability of educational and research institutions to take initiatives in the production of knowledge and in the training of human resources focusing on new development problems. In particular, **the capacity for independent inquiry remains very limited in the field of social sciences, even in countries and sectors where the professionalization of the social sciences has been comparatively more successful.**

- c. *In the new democratic political environment, the social sciences are encountering difficulties in differentiating and maintaining professional standards.*

It has been reported repeatedly that there is a great fragmentation in the field and a difficulty in raising the quality of the public debate on specific topics of the social sciences. The theoretical and methodological differences, often disguised by different ideologies, impinge on this fragmentation and affect the quality of the debate in a negative way. **The linking of researchers through international networks and regional projects is one of the effective mechanisms which can counteract that fragmentation and raise the quality of scientific production.**

- d. *Social policies are turning into a distinct field of debate and research.*

This field includes various actors, but has its current axis in the reform proposals issued by international organizations and finds its response in governments which face serious difficulties in meeting the social demands within their fiscal adjustment policies. The participation of social scientists within the field, whether on the basis of their academic status or their professional positions in the governments and inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, is subject to the funding provided by those organizations and governments. The resources for independent social research are very limited in comparison with such funding. As a result, and in a very diversified form, social policies constitute a field for debate and research which is closely linked to the reform processes inspired by the new international environment. Within that field, the contribution of the social sciences is multi-faceted, although its subordinate role is obvious, since the researchers act as professionals hired to perform services in public organizations of various kinds. Therefore, **the demand for funding of independent research on social policies and reform processes is growing although, there is at the same time, clearly a major limitation in the resources for such purposes. This contrasts with the expansion of international funding for activities related to the implementation of such reform policies.**

- e. *There are no obvious mechanisms for the accumulation of know-how and learning in this field.*

Reform policies for social security and health and educational services systems, as well as the development of focused programs to alleviate extreme poverty are underway throughout the region without proper evaluation procedures and, also, with a limited feed-back on experiences with such policies. Although the funding agencies routinely conduct evaluations of the impact of their programs - and occasionally also fund applied research on the reform processes - a sufficient accumulation of know-how is not being produced, since there are no organizations, with sufficient continuity and independence, involved in analyzing and observing the results of such evaluations and applied research. In spite of the fact that the communication between such agencies and the government with academia has improved, its subordinate role and the scarcity of resources are greatly limiting the role of academia in the learning process. The criticism of the reforms is growing, because these ignore the results of insufficiently evaluated previous experiences. For these reasons, **it is becoming necessary to strengthen the mechanisms for the accumulation of know-how and**

learning in the development and implementation of social policies.

- f. *The results of experiences and research are not being included in the education of social scientists.*

The education of teachers, researchers and professionals at the post-graduate level has increased throughout the entire region, although unequally. Teaching degrees, based on the experiment of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales - FLACSO (Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences) at the end of the Fifties are currently being offered in all the countries, but are only achieving noteworthy development in a few cases. However, the often exclusively academic training is only including local and international research results in a slow and imperfect manner. In the area of our concern, practical experiences, research and generated know-how - which as we have seen are not accumulated adequately - are generally not included in the training curriculum and are not subject to observation in the academic field. Consequently, **the training of researchers and specialized professionals in the field of social policies is very limited and conducted outside the universities and institutions of higher education.**

- g. *In addition, the level of professionalization is very unequal, with higher and more general standards in economics and with much greater diversity in the social sciences.*

This phenomenon, which again reflects international differences, is negatively impacting the field of social policies, since it promotes an arbitrary distinction between the dimensions and forms of the "economic" and "non-economic" analysis of social policies. **This conceptual split tends to parallel an institutional gap. Faced by both of these, there are few "bridges" for establishing continuity in analysis and policies.**

3. The IDRC Program in the regional environment

The intention of the *Assessment of Social Policy Reforms* Program Initiative is to support research on these reforms and to produce the know-how and the instruments required to introduce changes to social policies. The Program was designed in response to the environment described in the two previous sections. This involves both the rapid changes in the Welfare State and its social policies as part of the transition to democracy and changes in the regional production of knowledge in the social science field.

The strategy of the IDRC program focuses precisely on the linkage between the requirements and the production of know-how, based on an accurate perception of the strengths and weaknesses of the academic sector in the social sciences. Its design responds to an accurate estimate of the comparative advantages of IDRC within the group of international organizations and agencies which are directly involved in the region's social policies. In our opinion, this estimate is based on the following aspects:

- a. *IDRC has contributed significantly in the past to the preservation and strengthening of the social research capability of the region.*

From the Seventies, in particular during the rule of authoritarian regimes which imposed strong limitations on independent and critical social research, IDRC used its considerable financial resources and its political legitimacy to preserve it, supporting together with other agencies a group of independent academic centres specializing in the social sciences in the region. Those centres held and maintain a leading role in the field of knowledge production, although their profile has been modified, as mentioned above, by recent trends towards openness and democratization. From the Eighties, in a different political environment, the increase in scope of the social sciences' field, along with the reduction in the resources available from IDRC, created the need to develop new cooperation strategies. **IDRC was aware of the need to change strategy, and focused on cooperation on issues, countries and forms of assistance to social research.**

- b. *In the field of social policies, the funding agencies were transformed into an axis for linking ideas and programs.*

The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank which, since the Seventies, had become increasingly sensitive to the topic of inequality in income distribution, and its complex connection with the growth processes of the region, began in the Eighties to develop various diagnoses which justified extensive investment programs in the field of social policies. Such programs created a new environment for developing social policies, particularly in the fields of health and education, based on concepts and information derived from other historical experiences, and on currently predominant perspectives of economic analysis. However, precisely because of their governmental and inter-governmental character, the programs initiated using foreign investments were rarely submitted for independent evaluations and, even less, for broad evaluations of the impact of reforms on the political environment and that of political economy in general. As a result, there is a need to evaluate the reforms in the socio-political environment context and to question the consequences of the societal model to which such reforms aspire. Therefore, **the new actions by governments, often supported with international funding, will set the terms for a debate requiring data and analysis while, at the same time, it is obvious that the provision of funding for research remains very restricted.**

- c. *IDRC plays a catalytic role in the consolidation of the social policies field.*

Based on its institutional history and its status as an international agency specialized in research for development, IDRC has a profile which allows it to initiate activities for linking governments, international agencies, professional and academic communities, as well as various sectors of the civil society in Latin America. This profile includes the following elements: its capabilities as a governmental organization which, however, does not act as an official representative of the policies of its government; its position as a research centre, maintaining its association with the academic field; and its commitment to development problems. It should also be mentioned that there are elements which make its profile more blurred, in particular the periodic re-formulation of its programs and priorities and the budget reductions affecting it over recent years. Overall, and particularly with reference to the Program, the structure of international networks of social scientists has allowed it to consolidate resources for the development of knowledge, in particular **to expand the support for independent and critical social research aimed at improving the development of social policies and their implementation through instruments adapted to local requirements.**

II. THE PROGRAM: CURRENT STATUS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVED IMPLEMENTATION

The mission of the Program is to assist in directed social research to create know-how and skills for the evaluation of alternate approaches to such reforms, identifying policy options and support programs for the provision of social services. In addition, the Program supports the accessibility to such know-how and skills by governments and civil organizations linked to various stakeholders in the social policy fields.

The Program has identified four inter-related research areas: the evaluation of alternate approaches to the reform of social policies, such as privatization, focalization and decentralization of services; the analysis of new institutional arrangements for social policy, particularly through the involvement of non-governmental organizations in the administration and provision of services; the development of methods and techniques for evaluating social policies; and the analysis of the determining factors governing the options for various social policies, such as cultural, political and social factors which open or close options in a particular environment.

In order to ensure that research results have some impact on the policies, either through their adoption by governments or their use by non-governmental organizations, IDRC has emphasized

dissemination of the results, increasing accessibility to the new information generated by the research, either inside or outside the region. This emphasis on learning and communication as complementary factors to the social research are consistent with the focus on working with networks and regional projects, including cooperation with Canada and South-South links.

The total IDRC Program is based on a diversified portfolio of individual projects, regional projects and research networks, often implemented in cooperation with other international agencies which focus on various topics of human and social development of relevance to social policies. The portfolio includes activities in Asia, Africa and Latin America, in addition to centres and programs in Canada. However, this document only considers the group of activities being implemented in Latin America, specifically the networks and regional projects.

The development of the Program in Latin America has concentrated on a selected number of integrated projects instead of isolated projects, although individual projects continue to be supported. For this purpose, the Program relies on accumulated experience and on long-term associations established by IDRC in the region, whenever possible. Thus, without excluding the possibility of support to individual projects, the Program has promoted the operation of regional or sub-regional networks and regional research projects. These initiatives extend to various countries and focus on aspects of social policies which include the decentralization of health services, the linkage between education and work, and the role of local governments in social policies.

The following observations on the Program cover the group of currently ongoing activities, including all the regional projects and networks supported in Latin America.

1. Program scope.

IDRC has committed an amount of \$10,700,000 (Canadian dollars) for the development of the Program in the three-year period from 1997-2000, including activities on the three continents where it works, with the assumption that this effort will be complemented by other agencies. The greatest risk facing the Program, despite the attempts to focus its efforts to date, is that of operating with a level of funding which is not commensurate to the number and variety of efforts to which it has made commitments. Working in many and very diversified countries and doing so in an area of heterogeneous problems with their own specialized systems (social security, provision of health services, education, and poverty), means that the resources available for each specific project supported through networks and regional projects can only fund some of the work phases, or several of them, with the accompanying risk of not achieving sufficient depth in the analysis. It is certain, however, that the strategy adopted has its advantages: it diminishes the risks involved in each project, sustains historic links with centres and individuals in the region and provides an opportunity for rich and productive interaction. It must be added, however, that a highly focused strategy, for example support for one issue or project, would also not be advisable for the same reasons. To the extent that experience allows this, however, and if no expansion of resources occurs, the continuity of the networks could require the Program to engage in some major refocusing. To this end, there are theoretically three alternatives, although two of them are hampered by great difficulties, as will be seen below:

- a. One option would involve working in a significantly reduced number of countries. Prioritizing by countries or sub-regions is an option which assumes that the networks and regional projects contribute to strengthening the centres working in these countries or sub-regions. This assumption, although appropriate in the past, is no longer valid. Although the networks and regional projects have an institutional basis, they are based on the work of individual researchers, even in the case of centres which operate as the headquarters of each network or regional project. In fact, it can be argued that, as the networks acquire maturity, particularly through electronic communication, the location of its leaders or facilitators loses relevance. Therefore, the most adequate strategy is

precisely that of stimulating the expansion, and not the concentration, of the networks, involving researchers, government officials or leaders of non-governmental organizations, as long as a common understanding is maintained. As is well known, furthermore, the same individuals are likely to change their institutional affiliations and positions, while maintaining their overall direction within the social policy field or its components (for example, basic education).

- b. Another option is priorization by major issue, problem areas or focus and instruments of social policies. This is undoubtedly feasible but very difficult, since it is not easy to establish priorities among the issues of social security, basic education, primary health care and its funding, or programs focused on alleviating poverty. The processes of decentralization, focusing on methods, cost recovery instruments or new organizational forms for service delivery are common to all these issues. How then, would it be possible to determine which one or several of these are strategically more important? Who can make such a decision and justify it, given the objectives of the Program and the mission of IDRC?
- c. The third option is more feasible. It consists of favouring some of the many activities implemented by the networks and regional projects with the Program funds. The networks and projects are not only established in the area of research. In fact, in many cases, the support for research in itself is limited. It should be remembered that projects funded by networks and regional programs have limited budgets and in many cases were designed to carry out analyses whose data sources were generated through other funding. The projects only have more adequate budgets in the case of regional projects funded in cooperation with the Inter-American Development Bank but, even then, the amounts allocated are insufficient for conducting large-scale studies. In fact, the activities of the networks and its participants are not limited to research but are multi-faceted, and the individual projects implemented by the networks and the regional projects are very diversified. In this environment, IDRC support is fundamental, especially in maintaining the coordination facilities, conducting meetings or workshops, promoting communication, including in recent years the preparation and creation of electronic conferences and home pages, as well as the linkage with government sectors and civil society. We will return to these activities and their priorization later.

2. The objectives of the Program.

The problems of scale not only make it necessary to think of appropriate focus and innovative activities, but also offer opportunities to prioritize some of the objectives of the Program and the strategies most appropriate for these.

In our opinion, the Program and maybe IDRC in general share the trend of many international agencies to adopt an excessively rationalist view of the relationship between the creation of knowledge in social sciences, and policies and power. This view originates in the at least implicit concept that the problems of policy have an independent existence within the political field. According to this view, the policy makers require the appropriate research for choosing between options and for implementing those which appear most adequate. That request may be satisfied by researchers in various types of profit or non-profit organizations. Although this simplistic view would certainly be rejected by the Program, it existed implicitly when IDRC and other agencies developed efforts to shape or strengthen the analytical capability, that is the offer of know-how, and to establish incentives for research directed towards creating the know-how actually requested by the governments or sectors of civil society. It is obvious that IDRC is introducing a significant innovation intended to benefit not only governments but also, supposedly the civil society in its various expressions, as desirable users of that know-how.

In actual fact, that ideal model of application of the social sciences is inadequate, because the form which the same problems are assuming, their conceptualization and political validity, are changing and

becoming a political game in which social scientists are actively participating, in various forms and more or less voluntarily. The inequality of wealth or income distribution and of access to various types of opportunities or services, including those which are supposedly universal, are not in themselves political problems until they acquire a specific formulation and are linked with existing or potentially adopted government instruments, whatever their origin. Social scientists, involved in government, research, parliamentary criticism, newspaper debate, consultation, leadership in non-governmental organizations or as community leaders with some recognition and prestige, contribute to those processes of policy development and implementation which, in the current democratic systems in power, tend to have multi-faceted duplications. They are doing this from the moment when they create or explain languages and conceptual devices which are converted into the lenses required to view reality. The researchers, government professionals, elected or appointed political officials and the leaders of non-governmental organizations, although in formally differentiated roles, participate, in reality, in a less differentiated manner in the construction of know-how, a process in which, it must be said, elements of a very diversified nature and origin are involved.

Although they may not have been sufficiently emphasized, the Program objectives include the promotion on a participatory basis of know-how which is useful in *the processes of problem development* as well as in *the policy options* and *the instruments appropriate* to them. The activities within the Program may contribute to achieving those objectives, as long as the know-how is produced for use by the various agents involved in the different phases of such processes, which tend to have a repetitive character. This perspective erodes the commonly adopted distinction between basic and applied research in the social science field.

3. The networks within the Program.

A significant component of the integral focus adopted by the Program is the promotion of regional and sub-regional networks of research institutions. Another component, closely linked to the networks, consists of the regional multi-centre research projects. In fact, networks and regional projects are difficult to differentiate by an external observer, except possibly by the relatively more independent and longer-term aspect which the networks are expected to assume, a fact which may create expectations among the members of the regional projects to transform themselves, eventually, into networks.

This strategy undoubtedly contains some very positive elements. Constructed on the basis of years of work in the region, it allows for optimizing resources and facilitating the exchange, particularly at the regional or sub-regional level. Some ambiguities and latent dysfunctions in the model should be mentioned:

- a. The strategy of networks and regional projects has the advantage and disadvantage of continuity. The limited resources of the Program leave little flexibility for developing new opportunities and terminating commitments without great disruptions.
- b. The strategy favours relations with centres and institutions, although the level of available resources is inadequate for converting this strategy into a mechanism to strengthen development or institutions. In fact, the networks and regional projects strategy should articulate the relationship between conceptual or theoretical fields relating to both social policy and social science researchers located in different types of independent centres, public universities, government agencies and non-governmental organizations representing the distinctive groups who are the targets of the policies. This strategy will allow for the establishment of more flexible networks, on the basis of members with distinctive levels of commitment and participation, professional as well as institutional. In other words, the emphasis must be placed on the membership of individuals rather than of institutions.
- c. The networks increasingly orchestrate their action through the use of electronic conferences on the

Internet. The members of the networks consist of, on the one hand, a group of persons responsible for their operations, i.e. a limited number of participants with a consensual leadership - the coordinating facilities and their consultative councils - and a diversified client base of participants easily accessible mainly through electronic media on the other. Although the word *network* usually applies to the more extensive field of relations which reaches both types of members, network in the strategic practice of IDRC refers to the group of persons responsible more than to centres or institutions, as has been outlined above.

- d. Clearly, the networks with which the Program works have differences between them, since they were not all created at the same time nor were developed within the same program model. However, there is some ambiguity with respect to their dependence on the Program. The problem is partly one of sustainability: Can the networks continue to operate once IDRC assistance is terminated? However, it is also partly a problem of autonomy: Are the networks established on the basis of the association by its participants, who intend to continue the efforts and, consequently, the search for supporting resources? To some extent, sustainability depends on this associative basis. In this respect, it is possible to talk of a continuum. At one extreme, a multi-centre network or project may be an artificial creation of the Program, which may possibly be successful in its immediate objectives and which, over time, may be converted into an independent project seeking sustainability. At the other extreme, an informal network of researchers may crystallize into an association, whose formation may be supported by the Program, and which, from the start, expresses an independent, associative will with its own leadership and shared interests. The Program may work productively in both situations, but the first is more conducive to limited projects with time-limited objectives, while the second favours more flexible and durable commitments. In the medium term, when faced with problems of scale, the Program should direct its efforts towards the extreme of more independent and sustainable associative networks. In certain environments, as indicated above, favourable conditions for independence and sustainability do not exist and, therefore, efforts must be made to evaluate critically the means available for continuing projects or activities which will certainly cease to exist when external funding is suspended.

4. Social policy research and Program profile.

The social policy evaluative research and the research on intended reforms in Latin America have their current axis of linkage in the international investments of two funding agencies, the World Bank and the International Development Bank. This gives rise to a specific type of research. Through their resources and influence on governments, these agencies carry substantial weight in the substantive and methodological structure of the social policy evaluation field. However, they must develop their activities in close relationship with the social science community in the region for various reasons. Firstly, the objectives of their evaluative research remain internal to the agencies, occur in communication with the governments, and are not widely disseminated outside of them. Secondly, such research has an economics bias, reflected in the emphasis on the evaluation of economic results (in particular, the profitability of investments) without consideration for the social and cultural effects (negative or positive) of social policies and, often, ignoring environmental variables which have an impact on the costs or benefits of the application of specific instruments, such as youth employment plans. The research techniques used tend to ignore qualitative data. Thirdly, for these reasons such evaluative research is not designed to serve in transferrable learning, nor can it be associated with the training of social science professionals.

In contrast with this type of evaluative research, there is another type of evaluative research conducted by centres and researchers linked to the networks and regional projects associated with IDRC. They often also participate in conducting the first type of research. This second type of research tends to be conducted by social scientists who are not economists, and to be targeted to various types of audiences, including the academic public within the social sciences, but without extensive contact with professional

economists. This implies that the inclusion of economic variables and their analysis, when available, is conducted outside the framework of standard micro- and macroeconomic models. Many of these studies are exploratory, using a more or less rigorous qualitative methodology, and their description sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish between the analytical focus, the environmental description and the normative contents.

It is obvious that the above descriptions are very sketchy. However, they describe a reality whose major risk is exactly that it involves profiles adapted to a picture constructed by the researchers and users of such types of studies, although reality is much more complex and nuanced. In addition, it may be noted that the Program is aware of this false dichotomy between research types and is attempting to build a bridge between them. The networks and regional projects are reflections of this, since they attempt to fill the gap between the two types. However, it is not clear, at least to us, if the development banks are also interested in changing this situation and in supporting activities to connect the two types of studies and groups of researchers, in order to place greater emphasis on joint consideration and learning, and the inclusion of qualitative methods from the so-called "soft" social sciences. In some fields, such as health, heavy criticism has undoubtedly been directed against the economics-based view, linked to the government perspective, by its own banks, but it is not evident that this criticism has had an impact on the investment operations of the banks.

A review of the Program's objectives should include an explicit consideration of the role which it wishes to assume in the reconciliation of these two almost radically opposed types and groups of researchers. A case lending itself to this dialogue, for example, is that concerning the evaluation of the youth employment programs which have proliferated in recent years. Although a significant nucleus of specialists are networking in this area and there have been a variety of case studies conducted, the ongoing evaluations by funding agencies continue to run in channels that are parallel with and cut off from the debate being conducted by the "soft" social sciences.

On the other hand, given the above-mentioned problems of scale - in the sense that the Program would have difficulties supporting large-scale empirical research requiring the gathering of data through field work, via the networks and regional projects - it is possible to believe that, among Program priorities, prominence should be given to the objective of establishing better connections between both types of studies and research groups, and to facilitating the tasks of considering and analyzing studies already conducted. This would facilitate access to information which is often reserved for funding agencies. Although the obstacles to that linkage sometimes appear formidable, possibly because of the opposing rhetoric being used, IDRC through its networks may possibly be the only agency which may have any probability of success.

5. Apprenticeships and training as research-related objectives.

The Program, like IDRC as a whole, puts great emphasis on knowledge as a means to develop skills, particularly by governments and non-governmental organizations, and to strengthen the sectors of civil society affected by social policies (i.e. *empowerment* is called for). Equal emphasis is being placed on the development of effective communications to make that knowledge available, a task in which IDRC currently is having a fundamental impact on the region. Professional apprenticeship and training, however, are objectives requiring special actions which are probably not receiving the relative attention they deserve.

a. *Feed-back mechanisms.*

It is interesting to note what has emerged from the experiences of social policy reform programs and projects in the specific fields of health, education, social security, employment nutrition and minimum income support and programs to combat poverty in general. Hundreds of government and non-government officials, a large majority of whom have professional training, in contact with further

hundreds of community leaders and like-minded groups (women, youth, ethnic groups, etc.) are or have recently been involved in such activities. In many of these programs and projects, there are undoubtedly elements which take into account the need for and possibility of formalizing feed-back mechanisms at various levels, through provisions for conducting public evaluations which would reveal their costs and benefits. In many others, possibly the majority of cases, this does not occur, and feed-back mechanisms are limited and non-transferrable. The field of activities shaped by the networks and regional projects of the program on a smaller scale presents a similar situation. The Program does not explicitly include feed-back mechanisms as an objective, and fails to create the mechanisms allowing this to be promoted systematically by introducing self-evaluation and external evaluation focused on the acquired know-how. This limits the feed-back process and, therefore, the possibilities of improving the quality of social policy research.

b. *Training.*

We are here referring to educational programs, particularly those carried out at the post-graduate level, in the various social disciplines, with either primarily academic objectives (education of teachers and researchers) or professional (specialized education in the management, evaluation or planning of social policies). As indicated above, social science education in the region only occasionally includes research experiences and results, while the social policy reforms, when taken into account, tend to be observed from a specific ideological perspective. Not many specialization courses which could benefit from the experience accumulated by the Program are being offered in this area. It is recommended that the Program and its networks and regional projects assume a more active role in this field and require a greater presence of social science education and training. The promotion of specialized post-graduate degrees would undoubtedly be an objective whose scope exceeds the possibilities of IDRC, but the option of considering joint actions with other agencies should not be discarded. In particular, the scarcity of opportunities for high quality professional education in the region has often been noted by economists (or sociologists) in such fields as health and education.

6. Partners of networks and regional projects.

The support of research through networks and regional projects emphasizes the production of know-how which is useful to governments and organizations in the civil society. With regard to governments, a distinction must be made between the decision makers, particularly in the executive or legislative branch, and the executives, professional and technical teams involved in policy implementation. The contact is generally more fluid with the latter who, more often, have social science training and, to some extent, identify with the researchers. Although there is a formal role differentiation between the two groups, this does not exist in reality, since implementation by the professionals and technical experts in their role as executives guides policy development. In fact, linkages with researchers and the know-how generated by them is repeatedly established through the implementation processes.

In relative terms, the organizations of civil society and their leaders have less opportunities to enter into contact with the products of social research, in spite of the emphasis which the Program, as well as other actors, place on such linkages. The problems are various, but the fundamental one may possibly be that such organizations lack the economic and symbolic resources to establish such contacts. On many occasions, the contacts generate false expectations, since the organizations are more interested in pursuing economic resources than in using the know-how, including the consultations which may be available in the hypothetical case that such consultations are accessible to them.

In this sense, it is possible that the Program, whose objectives undoubtedly include the transfer of know-how to the sectors of civil society involved in offering the services, or which organize its reception by poor or discriminated against sectors, must more specifically prepare and explicitly sustain the development

of instruments to ensure that the researchers reach those sectors successfully. A fundamental element certainly involves identifying the organizations (generally non-governmental and non-profit) which have an interest in providing services and which are capable of using outside assistance and professional know-how to achieve their objectives in an effective and efficient manner.

7. Separation of economic and socio-political approaches in social policy research.

As already mentioned, the funding agencies, their investments and the actions of the governments funded by them are converted into an axis for producing concepts and know-how relating to social policy reforms in the region. In this axis, a micro-economic view of the social research applied to the evaluation of such reforms predominates. Overall, this results in measurements limited to the aspects of profitability of social investments, such as employment programs, and in the emphasis being placed on the efficiency of the services restructured in accordance with such reforms. Thus, consideration of the social and cultural aspects of the analysis performed at the micro-social level is often excluded, that is, the impact of the reforms on dimensions such as social integration or cohesion is not considered. On the other hand, the inclusion of social policy reform programs on the agenda for discussion at the macro-economic or national political level is not the subject of explicit consideration either, although it often becomes one of the elements within the large-scale objectives of programs of structural adjustment, economic reconstruction and State reform.

The specialization and division of labour imposed by economics on the field of research directed towards analyzing social policies are creating very high barriers against the communication and transfer of learning experiences. It becomes difficult to tear these down through actions initiated from the position occupied by the various participants of the networks and regional projects of the Program. The researchers located in the "non-economic" research sector are often outside the circle of contacts of the funding agencies and their partners in the economic or financial sector of the governments. The differences in schooling and professional identity, as well as sector location (the second group is not located in the central banks and in the sector of government funding agencies) are superimposed on one another and are mutually reinforcing. The differences are often increased by the rhetoric used. It can nevertheless be seen that, when the participants find a common language, a rapprochement becomes possible, although the manner in which to achieve complementary approaches is not necessarily obvious.

IDRC should use to the maximum its strategic position as a prestige and professionally independent non-governmental agency promoting research and development, to develop its role as a privileged interlocutor in the inter-governmental agencies area. From this position, IDRC has the ability to develop a strategy which can bridge sectors which have poor communications and, thus, reduce the gap in the production of new knowledge, including learning based on concrete experiences, and promote its dissemination. One element based on such a strategy could be to support the education of specialists in various disciplines such as education and health, which lend themselves to inter-disciplinary approaches. There is a general awareness of the scarcity of such specialists and of the need to strengthen existing programs. The medium and long-term effects, when educational projects with such an orientation prove successful, are very significant, since unique opportunities for cooperation with inter-governmental agencies and with national governments are created. IDRC could serve as an intermediary and catalyst, despite its scarce resources, given its strategic positioning.

III. CONCLUSIONS

This critical review of the IDRC program on Assessment of Social Policy Reforms, focused on its activities in Latin America, has provided proof of its adequacy as an appropriate and effective response to requirements which are currently emerging in the region. It has also made it possible to draw attention to the option of introducing changes in relative emphasis and a few innovations within its work pattern. In conclusion,

the major recommendations are outlined below:

- a. Within the academic field, give greater emphasis to the training of young researchers, at the undergraduate as well as the post-graduate level, in order to conduct studies and applied research in social policies. Such training must, by definition, be inter-disciplinary and problem-oriented, rather than limited to disciplines. More generically, the Program should stimulate the linkage of the networks and regional projects with the social science university programs (including economics), in order to achieve greater dissemination and use of research products.

- b. Within the field of policy development and implementation, to establish greater horizontal communication between researchers, government officials and managers of non-governmental organizations, so as to cross the barriers between the “economic” and “social” areas of the research which have been erected in this field. The policy reforms allow for social science input at all stages and on a repeated basis.
- c. Within the field of the governmental and inter-governmental agencies, to benefit from the comparative advantages of IDRC in order to increase the effects of the Program through alliances with other actors.

ANNEX 1

LIST OF NETWORKS AND REGIONAL PROJECTS

NETWORKS:

- LATIN AMERICAN NETWORK ON EDUCATION AND WORK
María Antonia Gallart
CENEP, Buenos Aires, *ARGENTINA*
- DECENTRALIZATION AND SOCIAL POLICIES
José Blanes
CEBEM, La Paz, *BOLIVIA*
Alfredo Rodríguez
SUR, Providencia, *CHILE*
- HEALTH SYSTEMS IN THE SOUTHERN CONE OF LATIN AMERICA
Célia Maria de Almeida
FIOCRUZ, Rio de Janeiro, *BRASIL*
- RESEARCH NETWORK IN HEALTH SYSTEMS AND POLICIES IN CENTRAL AMERICA
Julio Piura Lopez
Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Nicaragua, Managua, *NICARAGUA*
- CANADIAN-DEVELOPING COUNTRY PROGRAM ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH
Terrance Hunsley
CCISD, Ottawa, Ontario, *CANADA*,
- REGIONAL RESEARCH PROGRAM ON SOCIAL POLICY ASSESSMENT
Carlos Filgueira
CIESU, Montevideo, *URUGUAY*

REGIONAL PROJECTS:

- SOCIAL POLICY EVALUATION (Inter American Development Bank-IDRC)
Cristian Aedo
ILADES, Santiago 1, *CHILE*
Sergio Martinic
CIDE, Santiago, *CHILE*
- EDUCATION, EQUITY AND ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS IN THE AMERICAS
Marcela Gajardo
Corporacion de Investigaciones para el Desarrollo. CINDE, Santiago, *CHILE*